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Photograph by David Drebin

"The discovery of a new dish does more for human happiness than the discovery of a new star," French gastronome Brillat-Savarin declared about 175 years ago. Back then, the wise man probably couldn't have conceived of goat cheese tortelloni with dried orange and wild fennel pollen (Babbo); roasted cod with grapes, chestnut purée and verjus sauce (Café Boulud); or rice and lentil dosai filled with cilantro-scented potatoes (Surya). In New York, there is a galaxy of new culinary stars, along with dishes that are the epitome of human happiness. The only problem is finding enough evenings (and money) to discover them firsthand--that is, if you can make it through the crush at the door. Food has never been more exciting, and there is even more to come. Remember

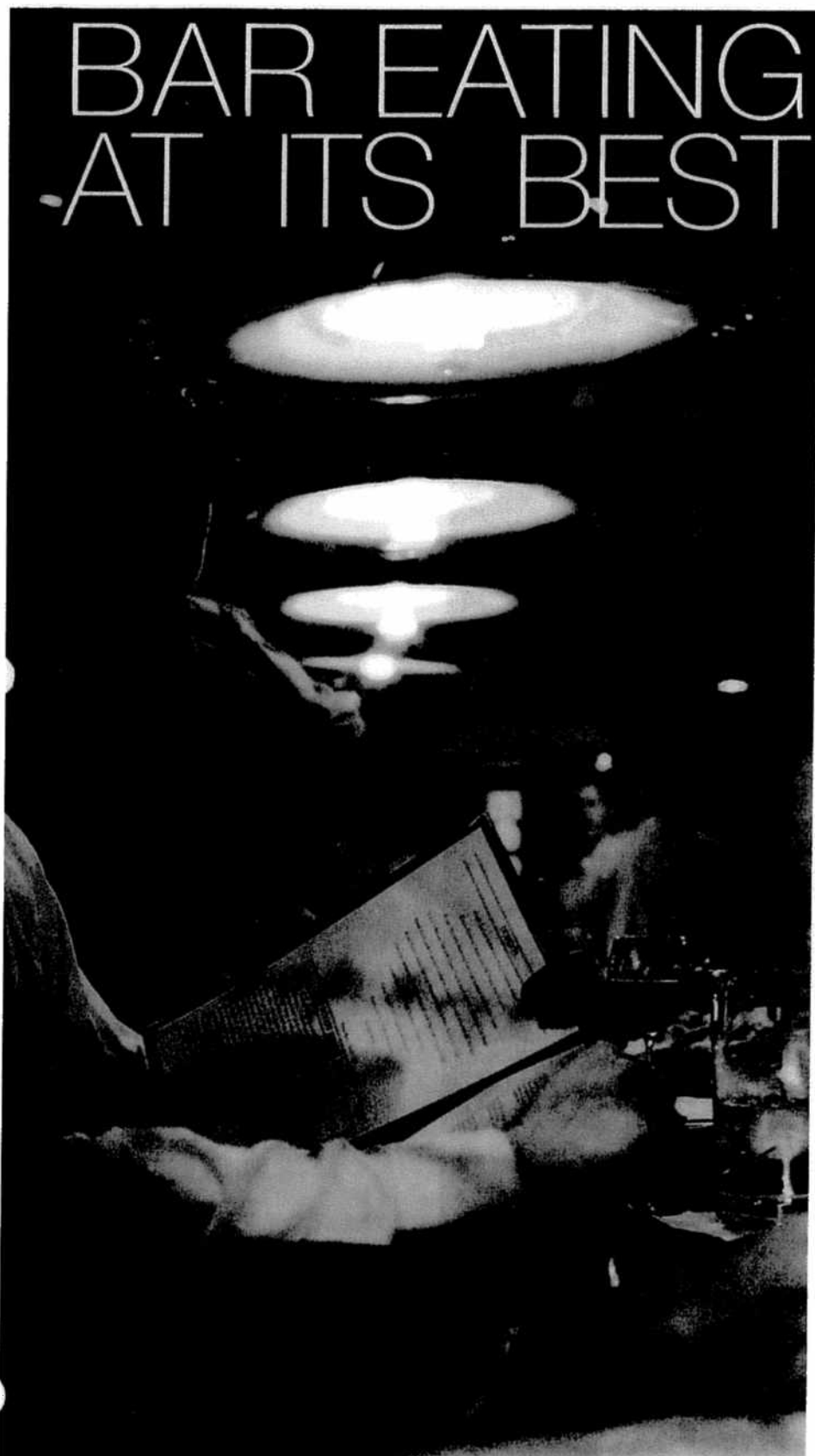
(continued on the following page)

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## Eating

by  
Kristen Wolfe  
photography  
Danielle Sevier

# BAR EATING AT ITS BEST



UNION SQUARE CAFE

In the mood to dine out this Saturday night? If you didn't call in a reservation weeks ago, your odds of landing a table at many of Manhattan's restaurants are slim to none. A few options remain: Take your chances on scoring that last-minute cancellation, or follow New York's sawiest diners to the bar.

Driven to the bar by booked-solid insanity, bar diners have found much more than just the next-best-thing to a table. Restaurants are steadily converting bars from holding tanks packed with stale nuts and hungry, anxious diners, into eat-drink-and-be-merry meccas. These bars are developing a culture of their own, and in many sought after addresses, possess the most coveted seats in the house.

Why are the masses migrating from the dining room? For one thing, dining at the bar is simply more exciting. There is an energy that emanates from the bar, and by sheer proximity to it, one feels plugged into the very essence of the space. Neatly dressed tables can feel removed, cut off from any sense of community. At the bar everyone is feeding off the same atmosphere and the stage is set for conversation, chance encounters, and cozy evenings. A candlelit table for two conjures images of romance, but what encounter is more sexually charged than sitting stool to stool, sharing a meal?

My own adventures in bar eating have led to some of my more memorable dining experiences. At a Sunday dinner at Union Square Cafe's bar, a friend and I happily assisted a waiter in tasting a thirty-year-old bottle of Borolo that a table had returned to determine if it had, in fact, gone bad . . . it had not. Situated conveniently close to the bread station at Tabla's bar one evening, I was privy to generous samples of the restaurant's spicy Indian breads fresh from the oven. Perched on a barstool at Raoul's, I was even lucky enough to receive free drinks from one of New York's rock legends.

Truth be known, bar dining doesn't mean compromising on either food or service. A bar diner is a real diner, and is given as much attention as their table counterpart. Doubling as waitstaff, bartenders mix drinks, pour wine, and serve meals with bravado. In spite of the chaos that frequently reigns, most restaurant bars deliver an incredibly high caliber of service, admittedly less fussy and formal than the dining room. The bar itself is instrumental in delivering a degree of casualness to some of New York's most cutting-edge restaurants.

So grab a seat. Immerse yourself in the whirl of the coffee grinder, the clink of ice cubes, and the buzz of conversation. Once you realize it's possible to dine on everything from the best hamburger to the most exquisite *foie gras* without ever touching a table, you may never make a reservation again.

**Drover's Tap Room**, a quickly established neighborhood joint in the West Village, represents pub dining at its finest. Although only two years old, Drover's evokes the feel of a longtime resident with its Old-World charm. The bar, the restaurant's most handsome perch for dining, elicits a sexy warmth enhanced by candles, richly stained wood, black-and-white family photographs, and jovial bartenders serving up frosty mugs of local beer.

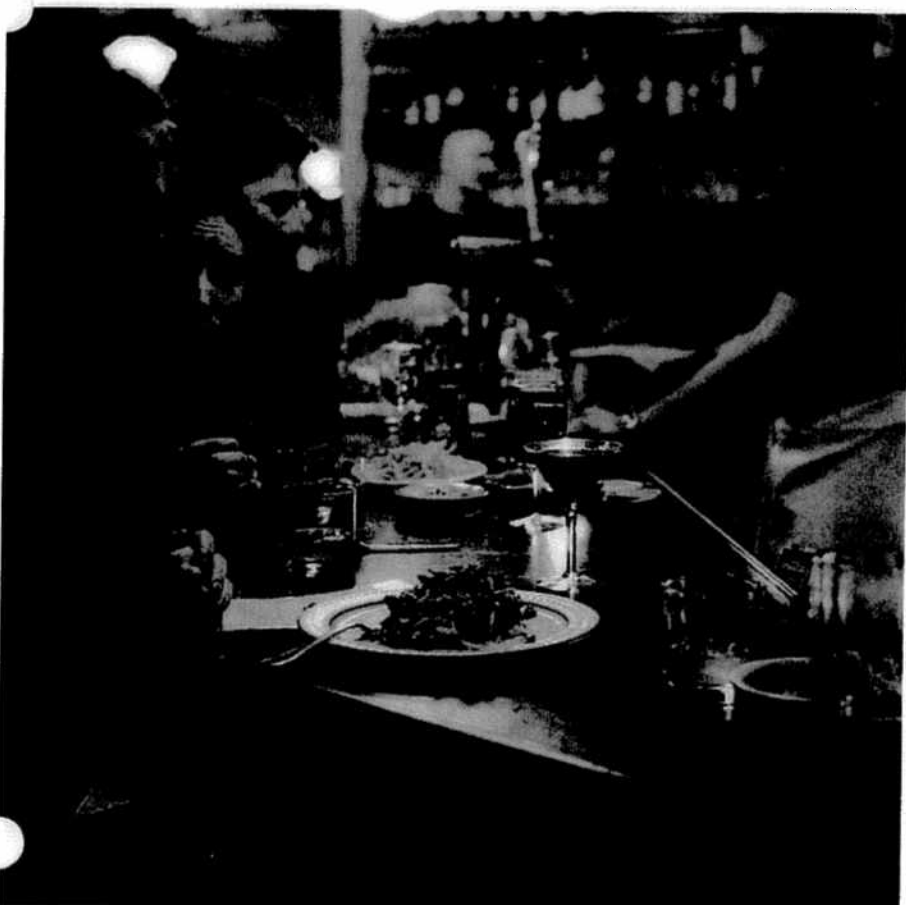
In a city of unending gastronomic possibility, where anything conventional is either fused, fiddled with, or frowned upon, Drover's offers a homey reprieve. Husband and wife restaurateurs David Page and Barbara Shinn have created a mixed bag of heartland classics. Mostly American favorites with the occasional overseas influence, the colorful menu is best described as comfort food with a twist. Though it may sound schizophrenic, it works.

Some of my favorite dishes included the tender duck salad with mesclun greens and fig marmalade, Alice's savory turkey meatloaf, steamed mussels in a piping hot broth of Park Slope Nut Brown Ale, the unforgettable crusty, creamy iron-skillet mac and cheese, and—the house favorite—homemade pepperoni with baked sheep's cheese. Local ingredients such as Long Island wines, North Fork honey, and shellfish, make an appearance frequently on the menu and add character to many selections. What's not to love?





RAOUL'S



DROVER'S

Perhaps only the deafening crowds that flock here on weekends. (Starters \$6-\$9, main courses \$14-\$19, desserts \$6)

Few places offer a better show than a bar seat at **Campagna**. With a bird's-eye view of the comings and goings of some of Manhattan's most recognized faces, the bar is strategically located for taking it all in. Patrons fall into three categories: Those who think they are really important, those who are really important, and an assortment of undistinguished gawkers. Falling into the third category, I can think of nothing better than to saddle up to Campagna's bar on a Saturday night, watch the limo's pull up and out, and feast on some of the city's best Italian food.

Chef-owner Mark Strausman's fresh, simple, well-executed Tuscan fare is proof that some sceney places have more to offer than face-time. I began my meal with an assortment of antipasti from the breathtaking market table (located appealingly close to the bar) adorned with heaping plates of marinated vegetables, cheeses, and olives. Many of Strausman's dishes hinge on the fresh pasta made daily. Some great choices include *tortelloni* stuffed with Mortadella sausage and ricotta with a sage-prosciutto sauce, and ravioli generously packed with pumpkin and squash in a parmesan-butter sauce. Meat and fish dishes are strong as well: The herb-roasted pork tenderloin with fennel and figs, and the wild striped bass braised with tomatoes, olives, and raisins are both irresistible. (Starters \$8-\$12, main courses \$17-\$29)

On the forefront of New York's best bar bets is Danny Meyer, whose **Union Square Cafe** offers the quintessential bar dining experience. A relative old-timer, USC's bar has been servicing diners with award-winning cuisine and acclaimed hospitality for almost fourteen years. The bright, airy room that houses the bar is gracefully accented with colorful, abstract paintings and majestic vases filled with blooming cherry tree branches. Friendly bartenders welcome patrons into the warm, relaxed, and completely attitude-free environment with marinated olives, assorted breads, and the kitchen's infamous, spicy nuts. Menu highlights are chalked up on a board and feature a collection of informal, affordable, and sophisticated nourishment.

Starters feature heaps of crispy calamari with anchovy mayonnaise, large and savory Porcini *gnocchi* tossed with prosciutto, and risotto with *foie gras*, cabbage, and sage. The grilled tuna in a soy ginger marinade and the herb-roasted chicken with creamed spinach are reportedly the most popular dishes, but I relished every morsel of the roast salmon with mushroom-*foie gras* sauce and mustard mashed potatoes. Do not, under any circumstances, leave without having the phenomenal banana tart—sautéed bananas on a thin crust, topped with honey-vanilla ice cream and a generous sprinkling of macadamia nut brittle—arguably the most outstanding dessert in town.

(Starters \$9-\$14, main courses \$22-\$27, desserts \$8)

If a meal at Union Square Cafe's bar isn't evidence enough, a trip to **Gramercy Tavern** will convince you that Danny Meyer has perfected the art of bar dining. Showcasing the sublime culinary skill of chef Tom Colicchio, Meyer again pairs stellar cuisine with glorious, comfy surroundings, a formula that inevitably draws a posh crowd.

The high-ceilinged room is filled with rustic abundance: heaping bowls of green apples, lush bunches of wildflowers, and bright vegetable murals. If the magnificent space sets expectations high, the food more than lives up to them. Start with the succulent grilled quail with creamy polenta or the hearty grilled portobella mushroom with farro and balsamic vinegar. Most entrée selections are straight off the grill: The snapper with roasted tomatoes and lemon-rosemary vinaigrette is my favorite but I couldn't get enough of my companion's grilled lamb with potatoes, garlic, and rosemary. If possible, save room for the farmstead cheeseboard, full of countless ripe and fragrant choices. Finish with the rhubarb cobbler for two or the rich and wonderfully spicy apple *tarte tatin* with clabbered cream.

(Starters \$8-\$15, main courses \$18-\$25, desserts \$6-\$8)

If you've forgotten about **Raoul's**, Prince Street's renowned French bistro, it's time to rediscover. Securing a seat anywhere at this hotter-than-ever haven of the hopelessly hip requires smooth maneuvering, patience, and luck. Weekend nights find Raoul's bar and dining room teeming with electricity. Upon entering, take a minute to marvel at how much



CAMPAGNA



coolness is crammed into this tiny space. As attitude oozes from every packed corner, the French waiters skillfully navigate through the mayhem, still managing to flirt with a sexy patron or two. Stick it out: The exhilarating vibe and consistently fabulous fare make Raoul's well worth the wait.

Highlights from the Franco-Italian menu include the inspired frisée salad with *lardons* and onion tart with melted *cambazola* cheese, the unique sautéed *foie gras* with lychée, and the roasted red snapper over egg noodles, lemon, capers, and anchovies. Everything I love about Raoul's is summed up in the *spaghetti chitarra* with tomatoes, olives, and goat cheese, a dish that literally melts in your mouth. As in any authentic French bistro, Raoul's offers the perfect steak and fries. In true Parisian fashion, the kitchen is turning out orders at midnight to feed hungry patrons still clamoring for seats. (Starters \$8-\$17, main courses \$16-\$28, desserts \$6-\$10)

As much as I hate to play favorites, the list wouldn't be complete without mentioning the most recent addition to Danny Meyer's restaurant empire, **Tabla**, a bardiner's dream. The dining room's \$48 three-course *prix fixe* is excellent and reasonably priced, but it doesn't suit every diner's mood or budget. Those who can't secure a spot needn't fret: Tabla's sleek, high-energy bar delivers more than just the swankiest spot in the Madison Park area.


Immersed in a wild scene at the long, curving bar feels like being at the center of the universe. The stark, granite décor, highlighted by fresh tulips and vibrant tile mosaics, provides a stylish backdrop for a sophisticated crowd. About the only thing capable of outdoing the polished setting is the wizardry of chef Floyd Cardoz. His melding of unique flavors results in dishes that are both imaginative and satisfying. The bar menu is full of food that lends itself particularly well to bar dining. The bread bar is fired up all night long turning out herbaceous variations of *naan*, a traditional Indian flatbread: olive oil and rosemary, mustard seed-garlic-corn, and pumpernickel-caper are a few of them, all designed to be mixed and matched with an array of chutneys and dips (three-bean *dal* with ginger, and lemon-chive *raiti* are stand-out picks). Both the perfectly seasoned cumin-avocado guacamole with spiced lotus-root chips and the Indian rabbit pan-roll with green apple chutney taste as interesting as they sound. The colorful and exotic fare is paired with an equally creative drink menu. The Pink Floyd—the most justly celebrated concoction—is a blend of juices, Bombay gin, and Pimm's Cupp. Nibbling *naan*, and sipping tamarind Margaritas, we watched as other diners had to be ripped from the bar when their tables were ready. (Starters \$6-\$12, main courses \$13-\$19)

For less frill and more funk, head to **Cafe Habana**, NoHo's recent resurrection of 1960's Cuba. The L-shaped bar is ideal for sipping beer and chatting with the adorable bartenders who are busy scrubbing dishes, making milk shakes, and, well...looking adorable.

Chrome stools position you close to a bevy of authentic Cuban staples: Plantain fritters, pork tacos with cilantro and lime, hominy corn stew with pork and chicken all arrive with piles of yellow rice and black beans. The rich and tangy grilled corn on the cob is a meal in itself. Hot corn tortillas work better than forks for scooping up the steamy, spicy sauces. Our coconut flan warranted a moment of silence: The heavenly custard beneath a layer of sticky, sweet toasted coconut is worth a visit alone.

(Starters under \$7, main courses average about \$10)

I don't know what is more remarkable at **Pearl Oyster Bar**, the quality and freshness of the fish or the unbelievable prices. Clearly a well-kept secret, regulars have been packing this Greenwich Village fish house for the last three years. With only one table, dining at the narrow bar is the only way to go. The kitchen's obsession with freshness (evidenced by the furious shucking of oysters in the open kitchen) became clear the moment I slurped my first ice-cold oyster. I proceeded to devour a generous bucket of steamed clams (\$8!), then moved on to the sweet and tender seared scallops served on a bed of mashed potatoes.

A smorgasbord of shellfish, two bottles of wine, and several desserts later, our party of three left for under \$100—a virtual steal in Manhattan. With flawless seafood at fabulous prices, I will be joining the ranks of regulars, and as hesitant as I am to spread the word, Pearl's praises must be sung. (Starters \$5-\$9, main courses average about \$17) 







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MAY 31, 1999

# NEW YORK

## . Nine. Eight. Seven...

From Times Square to Tonga, the glitterati are frantically planning the party to end all parties. And on the eve of the millennium, fun won't come cheap.

BY BETH LANDMAN KEIL



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5:30 P.M. to midnight. (Lunch is scheduled to begin next week.) A.E., M.C., V.

ONE FRENZIED SATURDAY NIGHT, UNABLE TO land an impromptu table in the Village, we dashed into the Pearl Oyster Bar just as it was closing and begged chef Rebecca Charles to feed us anyway. But she'd just cut her hand, and begged off. That's how the Pearl spent its season on my "must-try" list before disappearing into a file of yellowing clips. Till four weeks ago. My sudden yearning for old-fashioned American regional food reminded me of Pearl's tiny counter, inspired by Swan's Oyster Depot in San Francisco and filtered through a

Maine-seashore sensibility. Not everyone will feel comfortable in this pocket-hanky space on Cornelia Street, with just one table and its first-come, first-served, no-reservations ways.

I came late for lunch to avoid standing in line and sat down a few stools from the couple who own Home Restaurant next door. They pretended not to notice me. I ordered the mussels in a pool of mustard-spiked wine and cream. It was love at first slurp. "Isn't my clam chowder too thick?" my companion queried. (New Yorkers are all born critics.)

"Maybe," I agreed, sipping a spoonful of intense cream and clam, "but it's heaven." How could I have deprived myself so cruelly, I thought, getting a hit of sensational oyster brine undiluted by its crumb crust and deep-frying in the tartar-sauce-dabbed oyster roll. The day's special grouper on crusty ciabatta roll with more unabashedly lusty mayo was so good I had to force myself to cease and desist, since it was only four hours till dinner.

By 8:45 a few nights later, the first seating had begun to exit and we only had ten minutes' wait on the tippety metal love seat on the sidewalk before snagging three stools with a corner at the marble counter. There, a red-headed sprite with a gold star in her cheek was soon flipping cellophane-wrapped oyster crackers at us and pouring a fine Sancerre. The house's mythic steamers were already eightysixed, alas, but I didn't care—I wanted the lobster roll, a small fortune in lovingly boiled flesh and a delicious excess of that fabulous sauce (brilliantly doctored Hellmann's) on a hot-dog roll, with thin

ribbon fries (choice of ketchup or vinegar). Salt-crusted shrimp comes with carrot-and-celery-root rémoulade. So maybe the Caesar is a shade too wet; it's got anchovy you can see. The corn pudding is a tad dry, though perfect lobster, a pound and a half for just \$25, is what really counts. And the grouper is better than the whole, slightly too-cooked sea bass. Garlicy aioli on a crouton sails like a flag on an elegant Cape Cod bouillabaisse—one of my guests, returning the next night for an encore, asks for two croutons, please.

My chum spent childhood summers in Maine and has a firm grasp of New England seasoning. "It's all based on the Bloody Mary," she replies when I wonder

aloud what makes Pearl's crab cakes so brown. "Tabasco to start," she says, pointing to three outsized bottles of that mythic pow on the back counter. "Onion powder. Celery salt. Exactly what you find on the shelf when you rent a summer cottage. A squirt bottle of lemon juice." Plus, chef Charles advises, toasted crumbs from the excellent Pugliese bread the house buys from Sullivan Street Bakery. Want perfect

better-than-homey Maine desserts? Try bittersweet-chocolate mousse or the homemade butterscotch parfait with nuggets of praline (you can always stop at the dentist on the way home).

The Pearl Oyster Bar, named for co-owner Rebecca Charles's grandmother, is almost two years old, but it's been too small for its fans from the beginning. Having fed restaurateur Shelley Fireman at least twenty times and heard him confess he was stealing their menu for his new Sheepshead Bay concept, Charles is plotting to expand. "That Fireman," she says. "He even sent David Rockwell's people in to take photographs. And Larry Forgione was here last week. He's doing a seafood concept uptown. I guess I should be flattered." Of course, wherever Pearl goes, the oyster roll will always star. But Charles has visions of expanding the franchise. "I'm tired of cooking nothing but seafood," she confides. "I miss eating meat."

Pearl Oyster Bar, 18 Cornelia Street (691-8211). Lunch, Monday to Friday noon to 2:30 P.M. Dinner, Monday to Saturday 6 to 11 P.M. M.C., V.

Gael Greene's 1997-99 reviews are available at [newyorkmag.com](http://newyorkmag.com).



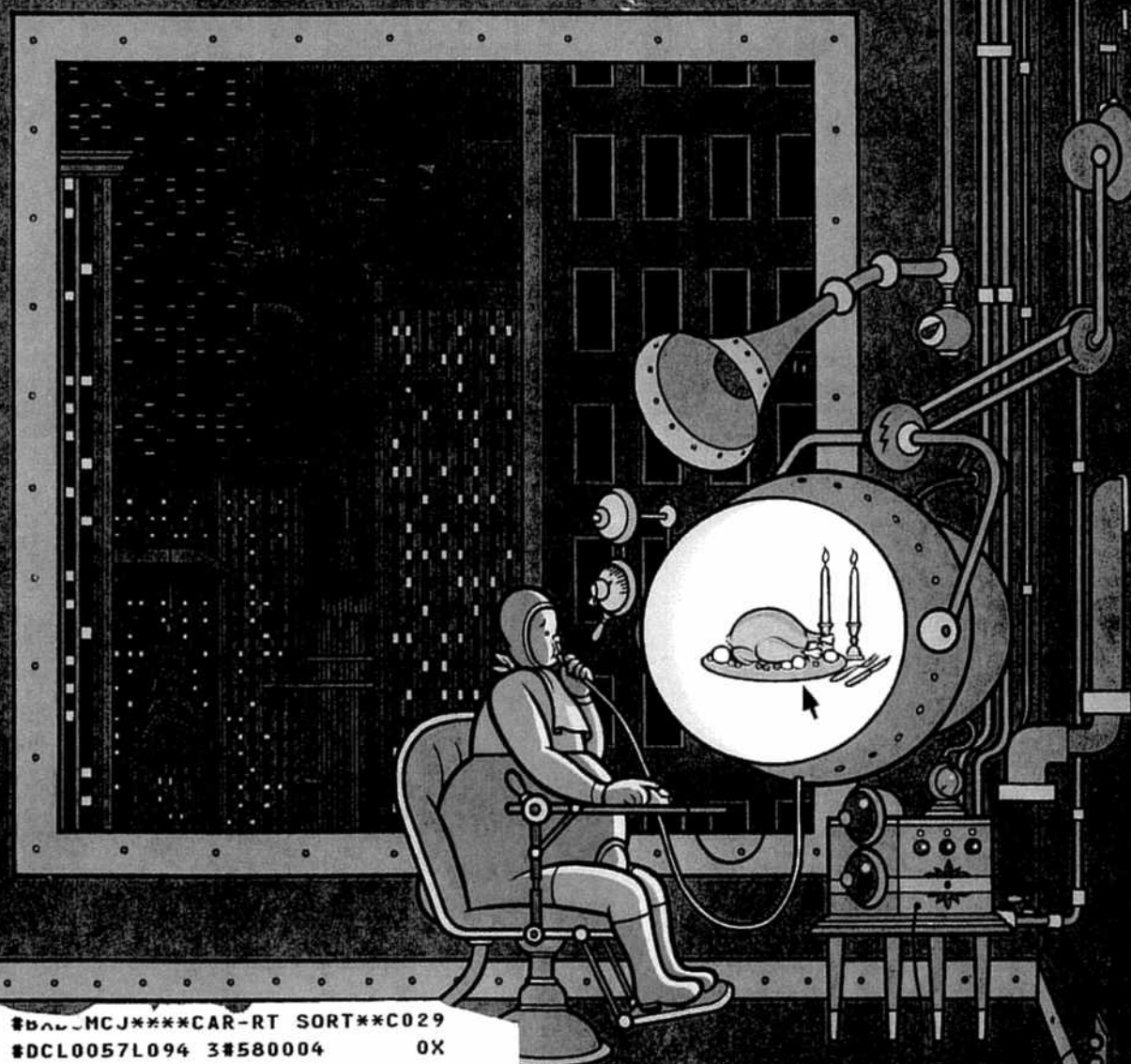




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NOV. 27, 2000

# THE NEW YORKER



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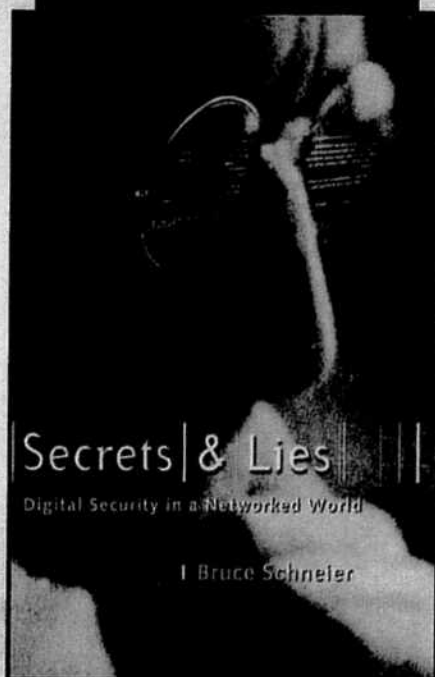
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moved to Broadway. Linda Lavin, Tony Roberts, and Michele Lee star. Lynn Meadow is the director. (3/20/00) (Ethel Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 239-6200.)

#### **TALLULAH HALLELUJAH!**

Tovah Feldshuh's engaging portrait of Tallulah Bankhead is set in 1956, at a U.S.O. benefit, where the stage-and-screen siren (played by Feldshuh) regales the audience with the lowdown on her life, several marvellous standards, and a bunch of charmingly dirty limericks. (Douglas Fairbanks, 432 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.)

#### **THE UNEXPECTED MAN**

There are only two actors in this small gem by Yasmina Reza, the author of "Art," but they are not just any two—they are Alan Bates and the magnificent Eileen Atkins, who are sharing a compartment on a Paris-to-Frankfurt train. He is a writer, and she, unbeknownst to him, is his ideal reader; their private reflections weave around and play off each other until the two passengers finally address each other directly. Reza's artfulness in presenting their thoughts—his discontent, her insightful analysis of his books and rueful reminiscences of friendships—makes this a very grownup play about separateness and connection, about the art of life. Directed by Matthew Warchus. (11/6/00) (Promenade, Broadway at 76th St. 239-6200.)

#### **WHAT THE BUTLER SAW**

The New Group's staging of Joe Orton's 1969 play stars Chloë Sevigny, Dylan Baker, Lisa Emery, and Peter Frechette. (Theatre at St. Clement's, 423 W. 46th St. 279-4200.)

### **LONG RUNS**

#### **AIDA**

Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 307-4747.

#### **ANNIE GET YOUR GUN**

Marquis, Broadway at 45th St. 307-4100.

#### **BLUE MAN GROUP/TUBES**

Astor Place Theatre, 434 Lafayette St. 254-4370.

#### **CABARET**

Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 239-6200.

#### **CONTACT**

Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 239-6200.

#### **COPENHAGEN**

Royale, 242 W. 45th St. 239-6200.

#### **THE COUNTESS**

Lamb's, 130 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

#### **DINNER WITH FRIENDS**

Variety Arts, 110 Third Ave., at 14th St. 239-6200.

#### **DIRTY BLONDE**

Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

#### **FOSSE**

Broadhurst, 235 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

#### **FULLY COMMITTED**

Cherry Lane Theatre, 38 Commerce St. 239-6200.

#### **JITNEY**

Union Square Theatre, 100 E. 17th St. 505-0700.

#### **KISS ME, KATE**

Martin Beck, 302 W. 45th St. 239-6200.

#### **THE LION KING**

New Amsterdam, 214 W. 42nd St. 307-4100.

#### **THE MUSIC MAN**

Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 307-4100.

#### **SWING!**

St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

#### **THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES**

Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 239-6200.

### **DANCE**

#### **NEW YORK CITY BALLET**

After its annual gala (Nov. 21 at 8), the company returns in "The Nutcracker." (New York State Theatre, Lincoln Center. 870-5570. Nov. 24 at 8, Nov. 25 at 2 and 8, and Nov. 26 at 1 and 5.)

#### **"MICHAEL MOSCHEN IN MOTION"**

The MacArthur-grant-winning juggler offers recently invented techniques along with his trade-

mark maneuvers, including one in which he walks through a wooden triangle while keeping multiple rubber balls bouncing multidirectionally. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 242-0800. Nov. 21-24 at 8, Nov. 25 at 2 and 8, and Nov. 26 at 2 and 7:30.)

#### **PARSONS DANCE COMPANY**

The choreographers David Parsons and Robert Battle present seventy-five minutes of work, including the company's strobe-lit signature, "Caught," and "Strange Humors," a staged argument that takes the form of a tango. (New Victory, 209 W. 42nd St. 239-6200. Nov. 21 at 7, Nov. 22 and Nov. 24-25 at 2 and 7, and Nov. 26 at 3.)

#### **"ANOTHER TELEPATHIC THING"**

Big Dance Theatre, under the direction of Paul Lazar and choreographer Annie-B Parson, recasts Mark Twain's "The Mysterious Stranger" as the story of Satan in L.A., using sections from actual Hollywood audition tapes. (The Performing Garage, 35 Wooster St. 966-3651. Nov. 22 and Nov. 24-25 at 8. Through Dec. 9.)

#### **"PEARL RIVER"**

The choreographers Stacy Dawson and David Neumann mix chop-socky fight sequences with the stylized movement of Chinese opera in a series of duets set to the soundtrack for Jackie Chan's "Spiritual Kung Fu." (P.S. 122, 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 477-5288. Nov. 24-25 at 10:30 and Nov. 26 at 8.)

### **TABLES FOR TWO**



#### **PEARL OYSTER BAR**

18 Cornelia St. (691-8211)—Once a waiter calls you in from the cold (Pearl doesn't take reservations, so it's you and the sidewalk until a couple of stools open up) and you're seated elbow to elbow at the marble bar or along the slim wall counter, you can, pardon the cliché, practically taste the summer salt air. Especially when a briny seafood cocktail (a sundae dish of ultra-fresh raw oysters and clams, chunks of lobster, a few huge shrimp, and a healthy dose of cocktail sauce) or a bucket of steamers arrives, along with a cold pint or a glass of something white.

The long, narrow interior is a minimalist take on the roadside stand, all gray and white with hurricane lanterns, a tin ceiling, a few kitchen antiques, and jumbo bottles of Tabasco. But just because Pearl is pristine don't think its version of the lobster roll will fall short of the wonderfully trashy mess you're accustomed to on the way to the beach. Actually, what you get is the old Ho-Jo version made sublime—a toasted, buttered hot-dog bun piled with cold, sweet meat drenched in lemony mayo and surrounded by a heap of salty shoestring fries. If you're still hungry after the roll—or, for that matter, after a roll accompanied by a bowl of smoky New England clam chowder and an exacting Caesar salad—ask the waiter for a platter of fried oysters, back in their shells again, on a thick layer of caper-rich tartar sauce. The more elevated chalkboard specials usually include two kinds of whole grilled fish, stuffed with fresh herbs and resting on a bed of vegetables; one pan-roasted fish; and, of course, a whole lobster, expertly boiled or grilled.

The crowd varies according to the clock. Go at six and it's a casual, pearls-and-flannel crowd of Village regulars. After nine the place really starts cooking; through the front window you can watch the blasé hipsters waiting in a ragged queue along tree-lined Cornelia, leaning against cars and lamp-posts, smoking cigarettes, and slyly checking out one another's cool new boots. (Open weekdays for lunch and dinner, Saturdays for dinner only. Entrées \$17-\$25.)

—Emily Nunn